SHORT STORY

AIR TO FORTUNE

OR; WHEN THE WIND BLOWS, THE CRADLE WILL ROCK

The train pulled into the station with wheezing pistons and a sharp, harsh holler of its whistle. A plume coiled above the smokestack, starting as a great choking mass of grey then billowing higher until it terminated in the air, like the curved blade of a scimitar or a serpent molting from smoke into nothing. There was a screeching halt as the locomotive slowed to a crawl and finally stopped dead on the track, after pushing its way along for some time against friction and the dubious conviction of its passengers, with its cowcatcher narrowly avoiding contact with the aging wooden stopper that marked the end of the line. A rusty bell atop the locomotive shook somewhat when the engine rested, an ailing chime that had not shimmered in the light for many years, if it ever did. The plume of smoke was kept faintly bent by a slight breeze.

A small stepping stool, its old wooden frame warped slightly through the years, was placed below the doorway of the carriage. After a sparse motley of passengers had trod upon it, out stepped onto the platform Ringgold Picayune, carrying his portmanteau. The gangly man idled for a moment, adjusting his spectacles, before shuffling angularly over to a seat ensconcing a pillar, away from the other erstwhile passengers. One of these was a lower echelon cattle baron with bifocals in a white shirt and faded grey suspenders, smoking a cheroot as he respirated with guttural death rattle-esque inhale and nodded along to the political cartoon in a paper he held. Ringgold squinted and wet his eyes from a distance to examine the picture but could only discern what looked to be a giant octopus doing battle against a man with a cane. Another traveler looked to have been cleaved in twain at some point, with one growing up identical to the other. The twin grey-haired society gals - one in green, the other pink - each wielded a parasol matching their respective color as they stood side-by-side at so close a proximity that they could have been mistaken for conjoined twins. The one in pink appeared to have a head cold. The other former passenger was a gaunt mortician donning a black stovepipe hat with matching regalia, a carnation in the buttonhole and a sleek trunk in his hand. Also occupying the station was an ailing ticket-taker who sat reading a dime novel behind the booth window, coated with grime and dust carried by years of wind. Ringgold himself sat close by his luggage, nearing an embrace, so close that it may have been confused with his own conjoined twin. In a manner of speaking, it might well have been.

After a moment, Ringgold reached within his coat and produced a telegram which he had accidentally blemished slightly with a small amount of ink the first time he read it. It ran as follows:

GOT YOUR LETTER STOP READ WHAT DOCTOR CALLED IT “NEURASTHENIA” DEAR ME DREADFUL WORD STOP NATURALLY CAN ACCOMMODATE YOU AT HOME NO SON OF MINE STUCK SICK AWAY FROM HIS MOTHER STOP WHEN YOU GET TWENTY AND ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF AGE STILL BE MY DEAR CHILD STOP HOW SERENDIPITOUS HEARD NEWS OF TRAIN DERAILMENT LAST WEEK SIXTEEN PASSENGERS LOST IN SNAKE’S HEAD ACCIDENT CRYING SHAME NOW GET WORD OF YOUR COMING HOME CIRCUMSTANCE OR SOMETHING STRANGER STOP HOW IS LUNG STOP WHAT JOY WILL MEET AGREED TIME AT STATION YOU REMEMBER IT REST NOW SO GET EARLY START STOP

Ringgold held onto the telegram limply for some time before folding it up and replacing it in his coat pocket. He eyed the clock on a pillar, the pointers creeping along stiffly like arthritic fingers. Eventually, a hangdog porter with a game leg appeared and took away the wooden stool, before the train began to reverse out of the terminus. Once, looking at the horizon, he thought he saw his mother’s carriage, approaching from the land that lay beyond, and had begun to amble down the steps only for the vehicle to be claimed by the twins, communicated by the two rising from their seats and descending the platform to greet the buggy at its arrival. Ringgold passed them as he walked back up and the creaking of the wooden stairs marked their parting farewell. The sparse station grew sparser still. Not long after, the cattle baron was hailed by a footman in an ornate red wagon that had appeared and which he waddled off to climb aboard. Soon, the mortician rose and took long strides down the steps - crossing two at a time, in fact - to seat himself on the backseat of a bone-shaker modified for tandem riding.

Lonesomeness was shooed away from the dusty platform only by the presence of Ringgold and the ticket taker. The hands on the clock crawled slowly, dragging their knuckles on the ground. In time, the man exited the booth, mounted a white pony he evidently kept near the steps, and trotted off. And so the tableaux was broken up, save for Ringgold and the wind. The sole proof of anyone else ever having existed there in the first place was a wooden sign tied to a piece of string the ticket taker had tossed over the counter with a message written on it, in blocky letters. Ringgold stood up and walked nearer the booth to read the words:

HAVEN’T YOU GOT SOMEPLACE BETTER TO BE?

“I’m not so sure,” he said aloud to the air.

Ringgold turned away from the reflection in the glass window of the booth and paced back and forth with his eyes to the floor, the breeze carrying wisps of fine powdery earth either for or against him. He glanced on occasion at the torpid clock and a few times thought it hadn't moved at all. Once, he could've sworn it had actually gone backwards. However, when he saw the two-horse carriage in the distance rattling closer and closer, he could deduce not without a hint of rue that time outside the rickety station was indeed marching on. He gradually made his way down as the carriage drew up. The pilot launched her hand upwards in a wave.

"There's my little homesick neurasthenic!" Mother Picayune cried.

Ringgold descended the final few steps and drew himself up to the prairie schooner. Next to his mother was seated a smaller, vague replica with a sullen deportment about her. The two horses stood sniffing about. They were Yen and Vitriol. As the little homesick neurasthenic made his way to board from the back of the covered wagon, Mother Picayune began making inquiries.

"It's been much too long! How are your nerves, Ringy?"

"Fine," he replied glumly.

"How's your lung?"

"Fine."

"It was the right one, wuddn't it? How's that one?"

"Fine."

"What about the left one?"

"Fine."

His mother had apparently gathered all the information she needed.

"Dandy," she said, as she grabbed hold of the reins.

After he had sat down on the seat in back, the mother bid the horses go. They began to amble back from whence they came without much guidance needed, the reins being mostly for the driver's benefit.

"We would've been sooner, like I wrote, only your Uncle Unthank heard from Anne Tibbs' sister's first cousin once removed's old man that some bandits were out prowling the countryside. Said they made off with Poor Richard's silver dog figurine in the dead of night. At

first, I thought about sending you another telegram, warning you of the danger. You wouldn't want your poetry getting stolen. Was it poetry you were writing?"

"Not precisely," said Ringgold. "Critical essays."

"Oh. Well, I thought about doing that, I did. But then I realized you musta already been on the train here, and I couldn't let you hunker down at that rotting old platform at night without so much as a blanket and them marauders pinching everything that ain't nailed down. After I made up my mind on that, I was still late moseyin' on as I had to tell your sister here about a score of times that she couldn't ride along. Say welcome back to Ringgold, Millie. You haven't seen him in many a moon, remember?"

The girl sitting next to Mother Picayune spoke, only halfway turning to face the young man. "Welcome back, Ringgold."

Ringgold nodded a 'much obliged' nod that he was not certain she could see, before their mother continued on.

"I was half-surprised to see the station still there what with them bandits. Said they made off in the dead of night. Said they stole Poor Richard's silver dog figurine. Poor Poor Richard. More'n once when I didn't see it coming up I thought they had moved the darned thing. Hadn't been to that station since we saw the Widow Snodgrass off in her coffin. The prettiest work in spruce you ever saw. Oh, dear. These reins and my arthritis. I was wondering, Ringy, perhaps you ought to see an alienist? Of course, you get your nerves from me. Before I begat you, I was startled by a camel cricket. My mother was known to be a mite frazzled herself. I s'pose it runs in the family."

A few times, Mother Picayune peered at nondescript silhouettes on the horizon, pondering whether or not they were the bandits on the lam.

"Your sister here said she wanted to ride along for protection. Ain't that comical?"

In spite of Mother Picayune's warnings, Millie had in point of fact stowed away in the back of the carriage braving the risks to be incurred, and subsequently had been made to sulk up front after the scoldings of her mother when the woman realized around halfway through her journey she was not riding alone.

"I was so cross," she said, "I coulda stood on my head."

This matter of banditry having chanced to be brought up, however, seemed to have fired the girl's blood. On the subject of curtailing burglary, pilferage, and general wanton hooliganism, Millie was quick to donate her views.

"If I caught those varmints, I'd tie 'em up to Yen and Vitriol both and bid the horses gallop. And then I'd do it again and again and again to whatever pieces was left, up til them bandits was nothin' but little smithereens in the dust for the wind to pick up."

"Dinner ought to be ready soon after you get settled in your room," added Mother Picayune, "so you'll have time before then to work on your stageplay writin'."

Ringgold had his wanting vision turned downward. Small pieces of rock, comparable in size perhaps to one of the latter stage yields of Millie's execution method, were bouncing about the floor. He looked up from the hopping pebbles to the railway terminus, totally deserted now, as the station receded further and further until it finally vanished from view.

The carriage rattled on until something began to peek out from the horizon opposite the one Ringgold had seen the station disappear into. The structure growing larger by the moment was a house and its satellites, which included a windmill revolving lazily in the air; a swaying clothesline that ran from the house to a somewhat uneven stable, the clothing strung up like the remains of some invisibly thin, poor dismembered unfortunate; and a fence encircling the tableaux, one section of it looking merely old rather than the doddery appearance of the rest. The jagged branches of an apple tree could be seen creeping around the wall from the long-suffering garden in back of the house, like a murderer lying in wait in an alleyway. Atop the house and under the bland sky was a rusted gamehen weathervane, oscillating slightly. Blanketing it was the wind, a primeval wind that had carved mountains and driven sails, now fluttering across *chez* Picayune-Unthank. Its surrounding grounds were covered with dandelions, tussocks, and wormwort. It seemed to be just as Ringgold had left it.

A path yellow with pollen led the way to the stronghold. The house was the only such building for as far as the eye could see, but though it stood alone on the expanse, its glum, drab tones would've made it difficult to descry from the tawny earth for any observer floating above. Then Ringgold spotted something between the house and the windmill he felt sure had not been there before. He was certain he would've remembered. There were seven slightly crooked blocks of stone embedded in the ground all in a row, and as the carriage drew closer Ringgold squinted to read letters carved on their faces. These included the names of Mother and Millie, Grandpa and Uncle, Yen and Vitriol. Ida was there, too.

Once the headstones were out of view and the carriage was adjacent to the house and nearing the stables, the whole vehicle stopped with a lurch which made it necessary for Ringgold to readjust his spectacles once more. A slight melody of wind chimes wafted through the air. Having to walk hunched over in the back of the wagon, he walked stiffly along to the opening

and maneuvered ungracefully down with his luggage in hand as his mother led the horses into the misshapen yet spacious stable. Before he had fully lowered himself onto terra firma, Ringgold heard the noise of the clinking wind chimes broken by a voice speaking with mock-surprise.

"Great flash o' lightning, is that who I think it is?"

Ringgold rounded the front of the house to the porch, but he had been beaten there by Millie, whom he saw the speaker engaged in conversation with.

"So, you brought him back in one piece after all, did you, Millie?"

"Yes, Grandpa."

"Mother letting you try your hand at the reins again yet?"

"Not since last time, Grandpa."

"We been meaning get that fence repaired anyway."

Grandpa Unthank was sitting in a rocking chair. The porch was narrow enough to where the back of the chair would knock against the wall of the house when in motion. The old man crooked his head in the direction of Ringgold.

"You hear about them bandits?"

Mother Picayune had emerged from the stable and, while walking toward the group of three, was able to take up the conversation.

"Sure has. Told him all about it just a moment ago."

Grandpa Unthank continued to rock gently as he addressed the two youngest relatives present. Millie was sitting on the railing of the porch parallel to him.

"Yessiree, the story goes old Poor Richard had to chase all three of 'em off in the dark with the scattergun he uses for pruning that spindly little orchard. Some punchers out of work and looking for trouble, I reckon. I anticipate your Uncle Unthank will bring us the latest word on the skulduggery when he ventures out later to-day. Said he had to treat a veterinarian who took the grippe first. Didn't say which war he was in, though."

"He's fixing to see his old room again. He plans on writing his adventure novels there."

"They're not—"

“Knew a quill-driver once,” said Grandpa Unthank. “Newspaperman. Fellow yclept Strangways, I believe. Had eyes for a laundress with wooden dentures. A cartridge tore through his gizzard one night and we had to bury him out in San Pasqual. Proud sort of man but engrossing as far as it goes. Wrote a yarn once about a headless chicken that ran around for a week or two afterwards, the way he told it.”

“I better show Ringgold the way so I can start to rustle up dinner,” said his mother, “he’s all skin and bones.”

After she opened the door and before the two of them went inside, Grandpa Unthank turned to Ringgold and spoke thus:

“Still het up, son? Don’t worry none. Them clean zephyrs out here ought to do your tenterhooks some good.”

And so, Mother and son entered the house. They were still able to hear the chair knocking against the wall as they crossed through the mudroom, she repeating “showing him the way” or variations of it in a singsong manner as she walked; he treading silently, portmanteau in hand. The two of them were passing through the dining room with its barren fireplace when his mother asked, “Do you remember where it is?”

“As a matter of fact,” replied Ringgold, “I believe I do.”

He was scratching the back of his neck as he said this, a nervous tic.

“What’s the matter with your neck?”

“Nothing is the matter with my neck.”

“Oh, dandy!” she said, continuing to lead the way.

The duo passed through a threshold that bent twice leading into the hallway. Before Ringgold had rounded the first corner, he collided with a cylinder desk. It had unlighted wax in a chipped candlestick so close to the wall which, had it held a flame, would’ve posed a non-negligible risk of burning the house down. His mother turned around at the sound of skin and bones thudding against wood.

“Oh, dear. You’ll have to forgive the mess. You know how this house can get.”

Ringgold stepped around the desk, but not prior to adjusting the candle in its holder further away from the prospective timber of the wall.

After turning one more corner, they were now standing in the corridor. On its left wall, a long procession of family portraits ran back in chronological regression, starting with photographs in oval frames - a poisoned aunt here, a great-grandfather thrown from a horse there, an unbreeched child or two - and ending in portraits of more distant, vaguely notable relatives, standing before embellished backgrounds of sweeping vistas, all of particular affection to Mother Picayune. On the right wall, there existed in parallel with the portraits the mounted taxidermy heads of deer, hailing back from Grandpa Unthank's past. A faded red carpet stretched far back to the end of the corridor, adorned with strange, baroque filigree that, with the aid of squinting eyes and a dollop of imagination, took on the appearance of gargoyle faces, sometimes warped facsimiles of those in the portraits. Some of the individuals in the photographs had their eyes shut and were sitting more stiffly than their relations; lifeless, even for photography subjects.

"Dearie me," said Mother Picayune, "how dreadful this carpet can get. I keep meaning to replace it. It does gather dust something terrible."

The door to Ringgold's room was on the right side of the hall, in-between two deer. When his mother had opened the door, he saw the room as he had remembered it. There was a modest bed, a desk and chair opposite it, and a sconce holding a candle and a bureau under the small window with dust motes swimming in the sunbeam that peeked through the drapery and fell on the wooden floor.

"Don't it look mighty convalescent?" Mother Picayune asked with eyes aglow.

Ringgold did not reply but walked forward and placed his portmanteau onto the desk, running his finger through the grooves of the tabletop's scratch marks, standing still and looking around these particular four walls that had held him for so long and seemed to match the image his mind automatically produced when tasked to imagine a room.

He clutched at the arm which had been carrying the luggage.

"What's the matter with your arm?"

"Nothing," said Ringgold, "is the matter with my arm."

"So long as it's dandy. I s'pose I'll leave you to get acclimated," his mother said. She had nearly closed the door entirely until she turned and asked, "Do what?"

This was met with silence from Ringgold.

"Oh, my apologies. These old ears of mine. I musta heard the wind whispering things."

Once she had taken her leave, Ringgold shed his coat and placed it on the hanger, telegram still inside. He bent his neck downward to inspect the luggage on his desk. He opened it and stood gazing without yet making any attempt to remove its contents. When he finally did so, he took out the inkwell and the dip pen, saving the paper itself for last. He lifted it slowly, far enough from his face to maintain a blurred distance between himself and the words. It was a critical essay on the admittedly mannered motif of Ship Chandlery as Redemption in the works of a rather unjustly neglected poet from antiquity. A fair amount of progress had been made on it, until Ringgold's hopes in this endeavor had been frustrated when faced with the prospect of concluding a particularly trenchant sentence with either "ad infinitum" or "ad nauseum." His shoulders felt weighed down more by the paper than the carrying bag which had contained it. He let the essay lay flat in the center of the old desk and tried to reassure himself there would be ample time to wrack his brains and locate *le mot juste*. He had already crossed out both expressions on the page several times so that the unfinished sentence resembled a line of wind which morphed into a dark rain-sopped cloud, and Ringgold knew on some morose level that this particular drizzle would not cease until he had found the sturdiest verbal umbrella.

The writer turned his attention elsewhere in the room. Above him were the rafters. Most stored only dust, but one, directly over the head of the bed, harbored a dormant clock sealed within a glass container, its pendulum hanging still like a holdup man from a gallows tree. He then turned his gaze to the window. He remembered, when he was a child, Grandpa Unthank driving a nail through the very far end of the corridor on which to mount another dearly departed deer, opposite a place where Millie had drawn on the wall. Later that day, when wee Ringgold was playing outside and walking around the discarded husks of cicadas peppering the ground, he saw the pointed end of a nail piercing through the wall to the air outside. The sharpness stuck out not through a spot near the end of the house, but instead just a few paces away from his bedroom window. The Ringgold standing taller and with eyeglasses crossed the floor to peer out of the casement. He leaned over the bureau and pulled the curtains aside slightly. Lichen grew on the outside sill and across the expanse the breeze coursed steadily through, like ichor in a vein. Ringgold closed his eyes and, as if the words were two nails poking sharply through the black nothingness, swore he could see "infinitum" stenciled on the inside of one lid and "nauseum" calligraphed on the other.

Sometime later, when the light from the window had crept further along the floorboards towards the door, the ringing of a dinner bell sounded throughout the house. When Ringgold slinked through the hall and around the corners, he could hear the clopping of hooves and the

jostling of stone against stone emanating from outside. In the dining room, Grandpa Unthank and Millie were sitting at the table and Mother Picayune was stoking the fire with the bellows she kept in the scullery. Soon, Uncle Unthank entered, returning from his itinerant healing. He carried a valise that he was tucking away under a wicker chair in the mudroom, an osteotome and wire saw peeking out of the bag. Millie ran up to him with an outstretched hand and an expectant look on her face. Uncle Unthank reached into the pocket of his overcoat and held out a balled fist, then let a variety of colorful candies fall into Millie's open palm.

"Sawbones is back," observed Grandpa Unthank, "been waiting here for ya at the table with the wimminfolk. And Ringgold."

The barber-surgeon turned to the writer. Although Uncle Unthank was not of the most sinuous proportions, he nevertheless spoke with an air of pard-like poise.

"How do you do, Ringgold? Long time no see. Working on a gift I do believe you'll be keen on. Nerves still shot? You might take up candy. Chewing ought to stave off those vapors awhile."

After this, the Picayune-Unthank clan assumed their seats at the table. The arrangement constituted Grandpa Unthank at the head nearest the door, with Mother Picayune at the other head. In the chairs at the sides nearest her sat Ringgold and Millie, opposite each other, the latter sitting under the gaze of her mother with the candy in her hands, eating around the blue pieces. Uncle Unthank sat beside Millie, their backs to the fireplace. During the proceedings, Ringgold momentarily suspected he was developing appendicitis when an elbow jabbed into his hip and had a brief tonsillitis scare after he downed a morsel of food improperly. The seat adjacent to him looked particularly ancient. Ida was there, too.

"You remember them bandits?" asked Uncle Unthank.

"As well as if it happened personally," said Grandpa Unthank.

"Was justice brought down upon them yet?" Mother Picayune asked, handling the utensils, her voice slightly altered with company around the table.

"Was it?" inquired Millie. "Get them to ship the bad men out here after they have one of those trials. Yen and Vitriol could use the sport."

"I'm afraid there won't be any such legislative action where they're concerned. Lawman came across them stiff as boards in a clearing. Nearly broke his neck tripping over them. They had camped out for the night and kept the silver dog figurine wrapped in an old tattered handkerchief. They all three had poisoned themselves, each one hoping to subtract the other

two from the arithmetic and make away singularly with the profits from their plunder. The tainted pot of stew was still on the fire."

"Vittles here are superb," said Grandpa Unthank, gesturing at his plate with the silverware.

"Was the silver dog figurine returned to Poor Richard? Do say it was," implored Mother Picayune.

"They need any help dissectin', to see what makes the criminal mind tick and all?" asked the socially conscious Millie.

"I am greatly relieved to report the figurine and Poor Richard were reunited. The man already has it unenviable enough, what with neither animal nor vegetable taking to his grounds very long, never mind a band of crooks trying to find purchase there as well when they should've stolen some sense instead to know to leave well enough alone. I count it a small miracle he did not turn the boomstick on himself then and there."

"Everyone finds hisself thinking that that sort of business can only happen to other folks," said Grandpa Unthank. "Maybe we ought to get some of that barbed wire they got now."

"The Moraines have a helping of the stuff around their land now," reported Uncle Unthank, "Damned near ran their littlest ones down after they ran dashing out in the road. The news they were eager to spread was of the sort that makes a man such as myself remember his creed - 'if physick is my lawful wife, tombstone-carving is my sordid mistress.' They asked me if I could ready a stone for their old man, only that I needn't be in any great hurry about it. He had mistakenly downed some embalming fluid early this morning when the light was low and he was coming out of the haze of sleep. I did some carving when a cousin of theirs died a spell ago of something hereditary. I told them, as long as it's staying in the family, why not let me fashion up a few rocks for the rest of them? But the old man wouldn't dream of it. Said it was a bad omen. I told them today that they could likely stand to leave him out a while and so long as he wasn't going anywhere I could finally let the man meet his marker. Ha-ha. I took a blank stone out of the wagon and carved it right there for them. They didn't object and neither did he. The littlest ones swore to hearing scratching coming from below a grave once and suggested hogtieing the old man just in case. While I was working on the stone, Missus Moraine took the fatal bottle outside and poured the remainder of it onto the ground as a fitting farewell."

"This whistle-wetter here's a trifle lukewarm," said Grandpa Unthank.

“Speaking of which, that undertaker fellow Smitty Zachariah was thrashed last night after he left the groghouse. Happened so soon after exiting the shebang he still had sawdust on his boots.”

“Probably some fool cremator done it to him,” Grandpa Unthank interjected.

“Grandpa!” protested Millie.

“As a matter of fact,” continued Uncle Unthank, “it looks beyond peradventure to be the handiwork of Baleful Bludgeon Bill. They found his calling card at the scene, one of them shrunken turnips wearing a mean face carved with a pen knife, and a slip of paper about how the world ain’t seen the last of old Bill yet.”

“That figures,” said Mother Picayune, shaking her head with high dudgeon.

“Well, all I’ll say is, the way them politicasters and highbinders is runnin’ things, it’s going to get to be where you can’t take a step without bumping into some incinerator. You’d think us reg’lar folk was livin’ in the wee hours and the crematorium types was just a-rarin’ to bring us the sunlight. It wouldn’t surprise me none if them cremator folk - or made out to be folk, anyway - were fixin’ to have their day. And lickety-split, too.”

Millie looked at him with dismay.

“Grandpa, don’t work yourself up.”

“And I’ll say one thing,” he carried on, “if those ash-heaps go up and them cremators start breaking down our doors and windows, I know who I’m saving my last bullet for.” He gave a wink in the direction of Millie.

She smiled at him with the warmth of familial affection returning to her face.

“Bless your heart, Grandpa.”

Back in Ringgold’s room, nothing but pale darkness showed through the curtains. The candle in the room was lighted but, owing to the position of the sconce on the wall near the window, threw meager light onto the desk. The writer was thus forced to position himself at an odd corkscrew angle as he scribbled, or more accurately, stared. He had alternated between looking at the paper below, the wall in front of him, and the ceiling, without having yet found his way through the storm of ink marks. The wind outside was rising in rushes, playing the house like a great blues harp. The chimes were jingling somewhere and branches from the garden rustled

against the house. He had looked over the MS. thoroughly, including the digressions on Shale as Unwelcome Influence and Volute Carvings as Numinous Debasement, along with a line alluding to a previous paper on Pewter-hewing as Ambivalent Force. His mental affliction appeared almost to turn physical; ad infinitum had never seemed so eternal nor ad nauseam so sickening. As the air lashed at the window, Ringgold sat wondering whether or not a glimpse at the essay by one of his relatives in its current discombobulated state would be enough to get him committed to a lunatic asylum. Beneath the curtains, the shudders began to rattle. Ringgold was eyeing the pen held between his stiff little finger, where he presumed all his talent was kept, and his ring one when the shudders flew open and a gale tore through the room, swatting him in the face. The inkwell toppled over at the disturbance and the papers fluttered like frightened birds. The swinging of one shudder had extinguished the room's solitary candle, plunging the bedchamber in a bluish-black akin to the ink blots on the page. Ringgold clamored with a startled swiftness out of his chair and made his way to the window, forcing the shudders closed once more and doing battle with the squeaking bolt until he finally latched it. He raced back over to the desk, producing a blackened rag from the bottom of his portmanteau. The inkhorn he sat upright again and with the rag he mopped the small black spill it had made, dark even when bathed in night. He replaced the rag in the luggage, and set about on gathering the papers which had landed upon the floor. The white shapes mercifully stood out in the darkness. He found one nearing the space underneath his door and another which had sailed below his bed.

Once he had retrieved them all, he rearranged the papers on his desk, during which he knocked over the inkwell with his elbow and was forced to wield the rag from the bag once more. Afterwards, he struck a match walking toward the cold candle and set fire to the wick. This Promothean light brought with it the knowledge that he had assembled the papers on his desk upside-down. He began the rotation and having made three-quarters progress in reorienting, nudged the inkwell a trifle too sharply with his elbow and sent it tumbling downward in an event that likewise necessitated the increasingly shadowy rag. Then he sat and stared at the wall for approximately eleven minutes. The candle again threw its angular gleam onto the desk, although it had not been much darker without the light to begin with. Instead of resuming the glacial nod of the paper-wall-ceiling ritual, Ringgold decided to stand and pace up and down the floor. He wanted desperately to jot words on the page, to write something - anything - down but there lay within a gnawing doubt that would not relinquish him from its fangs. At one point during this walk, his metaphysical mood grew and he chanced to look down at his hands. They were mottled with black spots that he took as the sudden ravagings of necrosis upon his person until he remembered his handling of the ink spill imbroglio. He swabbed off the spots before noticing the curtains were still awry, and so busied himself with a new task. He pulled the left

one to the center of the window and was gearing himself to pull the other when he noticed it had become ensnared behind the bureau. Try as he might, no amount of wrenching at the cloth could free it, and he simply decided to compensate by pulling the other curtain further to the right. The hiatus on the walk lifted, he continued to pace for around an hour and a half, before relocating upon his bed to perch, which gradually morphed into a recline. Through the wind gamboling in the darkness, he thought he could hear the whistle of a train somewhere in the distance.

As he lay there, his eyes were fixed on the torsion clock that balanced on the overhead rafter, like the Sword of Damocles. In his ears was a distant knocking sound coming from the front porch. He thought back to another moment from the clutches of childhood. His mother had gotten wind of a stranger wandering the general area and rapping upon the doors of any houses he chanced across, then producing a derringer from his sleeve to blast any resident who appeared in the doorway. His mother slept with a club by the bed, but Ringgold did not sleep at all. He wondered if a stray bullet might fly all the way up to their domicile and ricochet through the window, cutting him down where he lay and rendering the candlelight of his life tragically short. Then he had heard the knocking, wind blowing against the empty rocking chair, and all night he could not shake from his mind the notion that it might've at some point turned into the very patient knocking of the man with the six-shooter, only waiting for him to climb out of bed, stand on the stool, and reach for the door.

The dying embers of the candle shone while, as he inevitably managed to that night, Ringgold sank into sleep.

When Ringgold opened his eyes, he was greeted by a message engraved in rock:

HERE LYETH THE BODYE OF RINGGOLD PICAYUNE

The headstone lay at the foot of the bed. Below the letters was the day of his birth and space for another date to be chiseled in. Mother Picayune stood beside a bedpost.

"Ain't it darling? Your Uncle Unthank reckoned it was about finished. Well, as much as it could be. He says you can keep it in here with you if you want, so long as you won't be needing it."

Ringgold silently leaned forward to gaze closer at the face of the stone.

"Is something troubling you, Ringgold? Nerves still tetched? Maybe you'd better open a window."

Ringgold rose slowly from the bed like a rusted automaton and moved to the chair, where he sat down and clasped with futility his nasal dorsum while looking blankly at his own chicken scratch handwriting, the ink blotches like cattle on the tracks, impeding progress.

“What’s the matter with your nasal dorsum?”

“There is nothing the matter with my nasal dorsum.”

“You’d tell me if there was something the matter with your nasal dorsum, wouldn’t you?”

She inspected closely for a moment the thin limb attached to the weary Ringgold, before moving towards the door.

“Well, I was figuring later you could tend to Yen and Vitriol before your Uncle Unthank rides out. Until then, you just recuperate as best you can, undisturbed in your own little slice of the house. May you get well presently, dear.”

She left the threshold and slowly closed the creaking door as quietly as could be managed. Ringgold was still sitting unfruitfully when not thirty seconds later there came a melodic knocking upon the door, which thereafter burst open.

“Howdy, kid! How’re you holding up? Feeling fit as a fiddle yet? I was thinkin’, what say we mosey on out and tend to the team directly before Uncle Unthank sallies forth? Waddaya think?”

Grandpa Unthank hovered within the doorway, his tall frame filling the vertical space entirely. Ringgold pushed himself out of the chair and began walking toward Grandpa Unthank to follow him outside.

“Attaboy! Humours and mettle in apple-pie order already, eh? Onwards and upwards.”

Grandpa Unthank made his way through the corridor, Ringgold in tow. Rounding the corner, the writer collided with another table. The previous one had vanished and this newer obstacle stood on the opposite side. It supported a tin can filled with knives, their blades pointing upwards like caltrops. Ringgold managed to catch himself without falling on the knives and piercing his heart, which would’ve spelled certain death. Even a mere gash in his environment would no doubt lead to the wind clogging the open wound with debris, the ingredients for a mortal infection and withering demise. This was arguably the worst of the two possibilities. Ringgold replaced all of the knives in the tin can upside-down, their handles promising perhaps

a bruise on sudden contact but far from a violent stabbing, and moved swiftly to catch up with Grandpa Unthank, who had nearly reached the front door.

Once outside, the two of them made their way down the porch, accompanied by the melodious tinkling of the chimes and the whining wooden steps. Across the hard earth they walked until they met with the crooked stable. Inside of it, there were a couple of wooden partitions but no fenceposts or pens or anything of the like. Yen and Vitriol had an open chamber at their disposal. The two creatures rested their heads on the entrance gate when they saw the pair of bipedal animals approaching.

When the beasts had been fed and the trough, along with a small area surrounding it, had been inundated with water, Grandpa Unthank and Ringgold stood by the gate, observing the horses. Grandpa Unthank was talking to the horses, or rather, talking for them.

"Say, I was powerful hungry. Say, I'm just a handful."

Yen and Vitriol continued to chew but remained speechless.

Ringgold leaned against the gate and stared off into the landscape, wind moving across it at the measured pace of a floating, invisible herd.

"Nothing but a great big potter's field over yonder now," said Grandpa Unthank, "but it used to be a mighty-sized field there, just the thing for sport and play. Aye, 'tis so. That very same place. My brother and I spent many an hour trundling a hoop around it. Our father always told us to play in that field so we wouldn't catch stammers. The old man was a caution. Once, when the circus pitched a tent not far off, we went to go see the phantasmagoria show with the few bits our Ma give us. I got a good ways ahead of Frankie by running and ducked into a graveyard, what there was of one then. See, I'd put a quilt over Pa's grave earlier, on that cross next to the stones where they got the babes buried. I was fixin' to give old Frankie a start. When I seen him walking by, I jumped out with the quilt over my head, hooting and hollering, and chased after him a piece. I scared him more'n I had anticipated. He ran all the way back home, so afeared he was of his brother, the wraith. They wouldn't have any graverobbers or bodysnatchers around now if I kept pulling that gaffe. Yessir, made him jump more'n a frog in scotch-hoppers or a blanket toss. Got plum fumdungled pursuin' him thataway, but it sure was a wheeze. There always was plenty o' air flowing through our blood's jocular vein. I reckon it runs in the family."

By this point, Grandpa Unthank was standing beside Ringgold, peering out into the same broad vista.

“Nothing but a great big potter’s field yonder there now, though. Graveyard took that land, downright consummated it.”

After contemplating this dearth of values in the contemporary world, he pivoted from looking at the expanse to looking at the house.

“I dare say, it’s a fine thing to have the heir of the kingdom back in his castle, his castle in the air. An heir to air, that’s a good’un.”

Grandpa chortled lightly, then threw his arm around Ringgold with much in the way of warning. The arm that was empty of lank writers made a grand sweeping gesture, taking in the house and its surroundings, from the long-suffering garden and the stable, to the windmill and the graves.

“Someday, son,” said Grandpa Unthank, “all of this will be yours.”

The old man began to walk back towards the house, when he paused and turned around.

“Great day, I almost forgot.”

He produced from his pocket a handkerchief with something wrapped in it. The fabric slackened to reveal that it had been blanketing an apple. He tossed the fruit to Ringgold, who caught it after a brief juggle.

“There you are, kid. Fresh from the garden. Consider it a gift on top of the one you got this morning. And don’t spit out them seeds in the core, that’s the best part!”

Grandpa Unthank resumed strolling along to the porch, uttering “oh, me, me, me” to himself.

“Give me a holler if you need anything,” he said, before he disappeared from Ringgold’s sight. That he resided within hollering distance was indeed confirmed by the slight, occasional knock of the rocking chair against the house.

Ringgold split half of the apple between Yen and Vitriol, a quarter each, and ate the rest himself. Afterwards, he chucked the remaining core away and watched it roll to a standstill on the far side of the stable’s right wall. Though the ruse would not hold up to close scrutiny, he hoped that it would lay outside of Grandpa Unthank’s watchful eye should the old man do a brief reconnaissance. When he turned back to the stable gate, he noticed the horses nosing around in the hay on the ground, blowing clumps of it adrift with their exhales. Once enough of the hay was cleared, he saw that they were attempting to exhume from the pile something that

shimmered slightly above its faded rose color. He entered the stable and retrieved the object from the ground - a whirligig. This particular incarnation of the device consisted of several pieces of silverware blooming from a small wooden stem that had evidently been painted fully pink once, but was now chipped in a way which gave it a spotted pattern.

As he turned the item around in his hand, he heard a voice declare from behind:

“You found it!”

He turned around, not without a slight start, and saw the declaration had been issued from one Millie. Her voice had emitted from a higher plane than usual by virtue of her sitting on the top of the gate, facing the stable inward.

“I been looking for it all over the house, retracing my steps and all,” she said as she hopped down, “then I remembered I went up here with it to let Yen and Vitriol see.”

Ringgold released the whirligig from his clutches, and Millie looked at it in her hands triumphantly.

“I musta dropped it when she called me in to do lessons.”

Mother Picayune had been acting as schoolmarm to edify Millie in sociability and the choicest decisions to be made when faced with the tribulations that life in all its capriciousness durst to offer.

“Anyone tell you yet that Iceman Ogden got murdered last night?”

“Not yet,” said Ringgold, paler than usual, “I’m afraid that must’ve passed me by.”

Millie’s response would only further whiten his pallor.

“I can show you where it happened.”

Ringgold felt trepidation creeping up to wind itself around his neck.

“Well, I don’t—“

“Follow me!”

She began making her way to the house, and, as he had intended to soldier forth to the same locale himself, the writer had no choice but to obey the command.

They passed Grandpa Unthank still rocking on the porch.

“Howdy again, Millie. You showing Ringgold here that Newsman Hogpen business?”

“Iceman Ogden, Grandpa.”

“Fireman Noggin! I’ll try and keep up.”

The duo continued further into the house, a corner or two turned here and there, the knocking and the chiming outside a diminishing reminder of the elements at bay. Outside Millie’s room, there lay a couple of small objects that Ringgold could only parse by kneeling down to meet them on the floor. Upon closer inspection, they proved to be dolls, raggedy things dressed in scraps, which Mother Picayune had no doubt told her several times to pick up. One was leaning against the frame of the doorway and the other supine on the floor.

“Well, do you want to see, or don’tcha?” Millie asked impatiently from the open door.

Ringgold crept forward in a manner befitting his trepidation. The room appeared roughly the same size as his own, although he had always held the suspicion that it was at least slightly bigger. He could not tell for certain if the house contained entirely within the room created an impression of larger or littler dimensions overall. The doll-house was three stories tall, rising to about the height of Ringgold’s shins and not much smaller than Millie herself. It was topped with a slightly misshapen roof, jutting out asymmetrically to one side. Surrounding it were dolls of the same species as the pair that rested by the door. The room had one or two spots in it where the wallpaper had long since peeled away to reveal bare boards. Millie knelt down to the floor and beckoned a reluctant Ringgold to follow suit. As he did, he noticed a glassy dark eye peeking out from under the adjacent bed. He lifted the dust ruffle and bent lower to discover that the eye belonged to an old hobby-horse. There were other assorted objects tucked away under the bed, among them; a slate with faded numbers and letters on it from which Mother Picayune taught Millie; old scrolls of hymns once belonging to Grandpa Unthank; a second hobby-horse nearer the wall; a novelty postcard of a frog waltzing with a bee; two stereoscopic cards *sans* stereoscope, one depicting a cabin in a pastoral scene and another featuring bathers outnumbered by striped beached tents in some far-off resort villa, both pictures copper-colored; a broken hourglass emptied of its contents; and a handful of snuffboxes, some of which were open. Dust-swept dolls lay inside save for one, which was empty.

“Over here, you snoop.”

He returned his head to its natural vertical angle and looked at the diorama in front of him. Millie had set up the whirligig beside the house and given it a spin.

"Pay attention now. This here's Iceman Ogden, the deceased fellow," she indicated a doll lying in a small miniature wooden container filled with blue opaque objects; hard candies.

"He's laying out in his ice cart. I couldn't get a cooling board that looked right. I think it's how he would've wanted it. He's going to have a funeral in his box soon enough. Over there in mourning is his missus, the widow Ogden. It's been hardest on her most of all. She used to be a singer named Tuesday Fletcher but Tuesday Fletcher got consumptive and died, so this time around she's the widow of Iceman Ogden. And that there is the varmint that done it to him, Dastardly Dan McGee."

She gestured toward a nail in the wall of the room from which the lifeless perp had been hanged with string.

"Maybe it's better this way for Iceman Ogden. He was fixing to die a few hours later anyhow. He got the ague."

"Is that a fact?"

"The missus Ogden ain't got long to mourn, either. She inherited all he had, including the ague. And that varmint on the scaffold had about a hundred things wrong with him and the ague was the least ugly."

Millie pointed to another doll off in the periphery.

"Sort of handsome, he is, don'tcha think? That's Enoch the census taker. This all means one thing to Enoch the census taker. He don't have to tally up as many numbers now. He's decent at it and it's his office and all o' that but it's important he don't work himself too hard, on account of him having the ague and all."

"You don't say…"

She ran through the various illnesses that had at some time or another stricken the townsfolk. Ringgold learned that, in scourges of variety and severity, the powwow of dolls had been in the vice-like clutches of dropsy, consumption, and, in one particularly inexplicable epidemic, canine distemper. Millie's toys apparently took to plague like butterflies to blood. Ringgold eyed the congregation of mock-citizens closely. Some of them had shrunken prairie dress synecdoches not dissimilar to the type Mother Picayune wore. Other members of the cast had donned material that was more difficult to place, but eventually Ringgold did recognize it and was taken aback to realize it was fabric cut from his own old clothing.

A room at the bottom of the house had been sprinkled with the sand harvested from the cracked hourglass, with Millie apparently believing an arid clime would act as an effective panacea for staving off the rampant affliction befalling the population.

"It's also for the animals, that room. Only, I don't have any of them yet. You'll just have to pretend. Now these peoples up here…" Millie said in reference to a cluster of dolls on the top floor of the house which sat around a dinner table, "they've got the ague, too."

There appeared, at first, to be six of the dolls, although as Ringgold squinted closer he could make out a seventh among the outfit.

"It runs in the family," said Millie.

Later, the dinner bell rang and the rattling of rock signified the return of Uncle Unthank. He met Ringgold at the first corner of the hall and gestured for the writer to follow him. The trail ended at the mudroom, where there was a pulchritudinous but slightly cracked porcelain jar placed on the wicker chair. Uncle Unthank reached down to lift the jar, which had "LEECHES" written on the side of it. He requested that Ringgold hold out his hand, despite the latter's assurance that he was feeling healthier and bloodletting would be unnecessary. But Uncle Unthank insisted, he must humor a man of medicine, and Ringgold hesitantly extended a clammy palm. As the physician angled the jar downward, a rattling could be heard inside. Whatever it was rose in noise as it neared the open top of the jar. Then, from out of the aperture, there rained down a dozen small multi-colored orbs in quick succession. Ringgold looked at the candy which had decanted into his hand.

"Just what the doctor ordered," said Uncle Unthank, lowering the jar. "It ain't much in the way of sustenance, but a sweet or two now and then never hurt anybody. Webster the pharmacist puts them in there to keep out the kids. It works, too, by and large. He told me, hell, I may as well take the whole thing, as often as I go in there. He's trying to tidy up, generally. He had to see to preserving his brother-in-law in an icehouse when the ground was too hard to bury a man beneath. I think the experience gave him something of the homemaking itch."

At the dinner table:

"… So I'm looking down at the rats scurrying along the floorboards," said Grandpa Unthank, "then I says across the water, 'All right, Mustard. I forgive ya. But next time, toss *me* the canteen."

Fewer audiences proved more receptive to Grandpa Unthank's sallies than Grandpa Unthank himself. After the guffawing subsided, he reached up to his face and felt the pair of pince-nez he had left on.

"Great day, I forgot about these goggles," he said as he removed them. "I been writing my will as of late. You know how my ticker is. Turned out bully, if I do say so—"

"Grandpa! You won't have to write your will for a long while." Millie objected.

"Now, now, kid. Don't fret. There's still some longevity in this blood. That Old Roger Death has to wade through molasses if he wants to knock on our door. Besides, the will finds you in good standing."

Uncle Unthank began bending the ears of the table's occupants.

"You remember old Doc Laird, the records man? Cauliflower ear, I believe."

"Is he the one who wears that pomade in his hair?" asked Mother Picayune

"The very same. Family said he burned up. Said they left him smoking by the fire as played Pigs N' Clover then returned in just a moment's time to find him, well, smoking by the fire. The room was smutched with soot and there was nothing but a corncob pipe and a pomade-scented ash pile on his green upholstered wingback."

"That's terrible! Pa, didja hear that?"

"What was it now?"

"Doc Laird, he's passed on."

"Gracious me! What'd the man catch?"

"Fire."

Grandpa Unthank mused on the subject a moment. "That Old Doc Laird," he said with noted respect, "good on him. Way to cheat the cremator."

"If a better world lies beyond this one, we can be sure the man is playing Pigs N' Clover beyond it. His family said they were fixing to scatter him if the wind favored it," said Uncle Unthank.

"I'd like to travel around places like that," Millie said. "Ma, why don't we ever go anyplace?"

“We just went to the train terminus yesterday. Don’t fuss about such things, child. Remember the advantages you’ve had in your youth. You get to play with your dolls in the doll-house. You get to lay them to rest in Grandpa’s old discarded snuffboxes. Compared to most children, you are spoiled rotten.”

Millie only scoffed.

“Now, me,” the old man went on, still musing, “I couldn’t see the wreck what once was myself being strewn everywhere, even if it’s done out of familial affection and what not. Nosir, and perhaps I’m a sentimental fellow for it, but you can bury my cadaver right home.”

“We won’t have to bury your cadaver for a long while, Grandpa,” Millie interjected.

“Aye, that may be. But I anticipate it’ll be here. These days, you got learned fellows floating over the sea in great pig’s-bladders to land someplace they ain’t ever seen hide nor hair of outside raree shows and ain’t ever been before just so’s they can die there. It’s a daggone shame. You’re liable to get cut down in the air by some trick of Providence doing things that way.”

“On that subject, Mister Motes might find himself in agreement.”

“Is Missus Motes the one who had two children that lived and kept littlest one out of school because the spawn of that practicing conjuror was on the attendance roll?”

“That’s the woman, indeed. Spent some time in a sanitarium last summer.”

“As I recollect, her other half, he’s a trifle foolhardy,” said Mother Picayune. “Well, I shouldn’t say foolhardy, that’s a mite unsocialable, but…”

“I gather your meaning. I would not trust him with a chisel and hammer myself. His lady tells him to stay indoors when the weather gets tempestuous, particularly during those torrential downpours. Doesn’t want him getting struck by lightning, you see. Probably, he should’ve listened to her.”

“Good heavens,” Mother Picayune declared, “was he struck?”

“By lightning? He should be so lucky. The woman says he’s been struck three times before and it ain’t made him any the wiser. Just like notches on a hand-cannon. Says he sits out there on that porch they had built not long ago whenever a gale flares up, waiting for the firmament to claim its due. No, it weren’t no lightning what struck him. Hardly that. He was sitting ‘neath the window and might’ve passed through unscathed had the shutters not been bolted.”

Grandpa Unthank whistled admirably.

“I wouldn’t toss up any fuss going such a way in that rocker of mine, just so long as I’m buried right. Lest you want to see a gingham quilt floating ‘round these halls after I’m gone.”

“I say,” said Uncle Unthank, “them horses will be what puts my headstone to use. I walked out of the house of a brakeman who caught strep to see those two had gotten the rope frayed off the post and were itchin’ to steal away.”

“They’re a handful,” observed Mother Picayune.

“They are that,” Uncle Unthank agreed. “Maybe I’ll trade in those two old beasts of burden at the market and get myself one of them velocipedes, with a basket for cargo and a little bell on it.”

“Stop-uh!” insisted Millie, epenthetic schwas being a personal vice of hers. “And they’re not old! I’ll look after them forever and ever, even when they get too stubborn to mind what you tell them to do.”

“Then it runs in the family,” Uncle Unthank said, flames in the fireplace contorting in the background.

In his room, Ringgold sat crookedly staring. The primordial wind had risen again outside, armed with its routine band of gleemen: knocking, chiming, rustling. It howled against the glass pane as if trying to claw at the headstone inside, which Ringgold had propped up against the window on the bulky bureau. Adjacent to it in a small pile were the multi-colored candies. The band played on, its roaring conductor only mounting in strength. Ringgold attempted to blithely entertain a line for the remainder of the essay to follow, but was foiled by reminders of the abyssal ink stains, which barreled swiftly through his fantasies like a locomotive through a wooden wagon. He was leaning his head on his right hand and ogling the stylus held by the other, having managed to retain his sinistral handedness, and considering whether or not this trouble would’ve fallen upon him had he sprung for a quill pen. He wondered when, if ever, the winged Muse would fly in like a mourning dove with an ivory branch, his name etched in the wood. When the window began to rattle, he had time to secure the papers and the inkwell. But the wind was not left wanting in objects to scatter. At the flinging open of the shutters, the headstone toppled to the floor and the candy cascaded downward in a waterfall trickle. The candle was extinguished, soaking the room at once in the deep dark blue of the night. Ringgold placed the corpus he had protected in his portmanteau and rose to attend to the area of disaster.

The stone lay flat on the floor, intact - though small pebbles had broken off of it, casualties in the fall. Ringgold knelt down to carry it in both hands. He supported it inadvertently in the manner of an infant, the wind having rocked its cradle. The face bore at least one resemblance to the writer in that it was stamped with his name, though the likeness had been dampered slightly. A fissure ran through the center of the second ‘g,’ and the owner of the handle couldn’t help feeling it was similar to the marks on his paper. He lugged the mollycoddled headstone over to his desk and set it leaning against the front leg nearest the door. When he turned back around to face the open window, he saw two long faces from out of the dark poking through it. As fate would have it, Ringgold’s grave being flung by Mother Nature to the floorboards had created such a racket that the horses rushed out to survey the scene through the window and investigate the commotion. Vitriol was drinking up the darkened room with a phlegmatic gaze while Yen stood cautiously behind, hemming and likewise hawing. The writer felt that an audience would not be conducive to his work and set upon escorting the creatures on the return to their quarters.

He gestured for the horses to stand back as he manipulated his gangly form through the window frame and onto the earth. He could parse the jagged outline of the stable against the night. Beckoning the horses forward, the trio trod to the destination post haste. The equine pair soon overtook the human and led him to the uneven structure. When they had arrived, he uncovered the unassuming accomplice in their escape; the gate had been left unlatched from earlier in the day. Yen and Vitriol entered with what appeared to be satisfaction at having obtained the answer to the mystery of the clattering sound. Ringgold rectified the problem of the open gate and bid the team of horses a parting good-by. On his walk back, he thought at one point he saw two arms in the distance rushing outward to throttle him. His pulse steadied when he realized they were sleeves belonging to an article on the clothesline animated by the circulating night air. Each garment on the wire rippled with this flowing consanguinity, the wind their common blood. He turned to look above himself while walking. The stars shone like lights through holes in the wall of a pitch-black room; the Moon looming down above with a dead stony gaze, it might just as well have had Ringgold’s name carved in its near side; planets, assorted celestial candy, rolling somewhere beyond; and the desert void in-between, like so much spilled ink. When Ringgold was closer to the window, he saw something glimmer slightly in the pale moonlight. It came from a small spot in the wall of the house, just a few paces away from his room. He crossed through the threshold, leaving behind the horses, outer space, the shimmering nail. As he stretched across the bureau and began to lower himself, he nearly slipped on the errant pieces of candy which littered the floor. Having successfully descended, he

shuttered the window and relighted the candle. Then, he set about hunting and gathering the sweets that lurked within the chamber.

Several had made no attempt to conceal themselves, a few even catching the light like eyeballs before a flame. Others proved more surreptitious. He had lost items in his room before and had yet to retrieve them ever again, worrying him that some of the candy would go eternally sight unseen in whatever void realm of non-existence was held within his chambers. He did in time, however, recover them all. Scooping up the granular relics of gravestone that were still on the floor, he crammed the two piles into a drawer of the bureau, wondering to himself if his path and theirs should ever cross again. He had nearly forgotten about the critical essay in this excitement and when he produced it from the bag, his inertia somehow seemed to petrify. He paced up and down, down and up the room for a time, to no apparent avail. The Muse evidently had to see a man about a horse. Inspiration appearing less likely to poke its head through his window than barnyard animals, Ringgold extinguished the candle himself and fell asleep.

When Ringgold awoke, it was to the sound of clattering somewhere within the house. He knew recuperation had not paid him a visit, for as soon as the external noise ended, a similar clattering began in his head. He seemed perspired and his gullet was smarting, as if he had wharfed down dead beachgum fruit for dinner. Bronchitis? he thought. Perhaps, perhaps not. His temperature was at odds with himself, like a man in the middle of a train where the balcony of the last car and the stoker's boiler in front were but a few steps away from each other. No, this was something else - something that had been a long time in arriving. He rose wearily from the bed, walking slowly to sit down before the desk.

So this was it; tuberculosis. He had caught it in a noisome gutter somehow, somewhere, and the dry air had not wrought its cure. He reclined and placed a damp arm over his eyes, pushing his spectacles up to his brow.

"It's curtains," he said, quietly but out loud.

If this was how it was to end, he knew he had to act appropriately. He glanced at the critical essay but decided completing it would be an activity best suited for later, in the throes even of his final moments. He rose from the chair and exited through the door, as if Grim Death had shed molasses finally to knock upon it, and he had answered.

The death march began in the hallway, where Ringgold rounded the corner and nearly ran into the grandfather clock that had appeared overnight. It was taller than him and, as he saw its side before its pendulum and face, for a moment he believed it was dead. But as he listened closely, he could hear a faint ticking emitting from the great device. When he looked at its front, he

noticed the clock, whether augmented by human hand or some abstruse flux in the magnetosphere, was ticking backwards. Ringgold initially planned to continue past it on this, his final day, without much in the way of a skirmish. However, when he saw himself crossing by, he was met by a vision of the device crashing down upon him and pinning his person to the ground. In this event, dehydration would be sure to grant his reward, or exposure, should the wind carry the house away or it be stolen from its foundation by some occult thief or even knocked down then and there, as the clock while falling would make some degree of contact with the opposing wall.

In the early stages of imagination, such ideas did not impede his plans. But as he ruminated further, he realized the full weight - metaphysical and otherwise - of this prospective disaster. Should any or somehow all of these possibilities occur and the bearing of the timepiece spell his doom, such a mortal accident would be sure to dim the flame on the tragical fate allotted him by his newfound affliction. The ever fickle Lady Serendipity did not light on a situation as dire as his everyday. A good tubercle was getting more difficult to come by, what with modern medicine going the way it was. There seemed no sense in wasting his good fortune. He made up his mind to cultivate his opportune death by steadying the grandfather clock until he was certain it was stable, then leaping nimbly across the path its pitiless face gazed over.

When the ill writer was outside, simultaneously attending and bidding farewell to Yen and Vitriol, another familiar face appeared. Ringgold kept himself at a distance.

“Hear about Laundress Miss Dimsdale? She got struck by hail and she was just getting better from her ague.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Millie.”

“You want me to show you some time later? There’s a wedding in the ice cream parlor before she goes in the snuffbox.”

“Millie, I’m afraid you may not be seeing me again.”

“Are you going somewhere?”

“In a sense, yes, I am.”

“Oh, yeah? Is it back to where you came from? Where ya going?”

“Well, there are many disputes on that. I’m half-wondering myself.”

“So you don’t know where? Can I go with you?”

“Perhaps you will, someday.”

Millie looked despondently at the ground and kicked at the dust.

“That’s tough. It’s too bad. You’ll miss out on what’s happening tomorrow. The ring bearer gets beaned by a twig during the wedding ceremony and the haberdasher’s missus comes down with St. Vitus’ dance.”

And so Millie plodded off, presumably preparing to administer rest and a restorative bout of the tarantella to her loyal subjects.

Back through the halls and in the bedchamber that was to be his mausoleum, Ringgold stared infirmly at the essay on his desk. It seemed only natural that this scholarly article, his magnum opus, should be completed so shortly before his timely demise which lay right around the corner. Perhaps more naturally, he still could not decide on how to complete it. The ink blots on the page now brought to mind tubercles in the body.

He rose and the death march became a death pace, up and down his personal sick ward. He wondered how many steps he had left to walk, how oblivious he had been upon first arriving, and yet somehow knowing even in those distant days that he should never escape alive, that he would have to lay down his life as he jotted words on the page. Nevertheless, he hoped the former would delay itself until he had performed the latter.

At dinner, Ringgold sat about a meter and a half back from the table, the plate in his lap. He had initially considered taking dinner in his solitary ward, but decided it was better, if not exactly diverting, to observe from a distance the family one last time.

“…So the circuit rider hands Wilmouth back the glass eye and says to him, real quiet-like, “Son, I hope you’re as sure as it’s a vale of tears that you can dance a reel.”

After the gaffe, Mother Picayune turned and addressed the patient in his shroud of shadow.

“Ringgold, why don’t you get out of the dark and come sit at the table?”

For reply, Ringgold only shook his head grimly in the negative.

“You know that little grange by the road, the one near where Lemuel Landrum shot that highwayman? The Dartmoors live there. Well, lived. Their youngest went out of her head last night. Grabbed the axe for firewood and used it instead for chopping up her kin. Mixed up the arms and the legs so there was no telling whose was whose. Naturally, this sort of thing will out.

When the law found her, she was caked in blood shivering in a privy, murmuring something to the effect of “That ought to learn them” or “I couldn’t burn them” or what have you. They hauled her away in the cool early morn.”

“Increase Dartmoor took that Jenkins girl for a wife, didn’t he?” asked Mother Unthank. “I heard she was nearing five score years old. She don’t look it.”

“What you’ve heard is true. And she won’t be getting any older. Increase settled down and bought the house and a gold-plated ear horn with his oil money. She had wed him shortly before and played the harpsichord. Got a birthmark that runs from her neck to where her arm is. Or was, rather.”

“Looks like the wind’ll pick up come morrow,” said Grandpa Unthank. “We could use the rain but doubtful that we’ll get any. That’ll be our luck.”

“Mother always said could tell when a storm was brewing,” remembered Mother Picayune, “when her joints got to smarting. I can hear her saying now, “‘My knees smart. Must be somethin’ brewing.’”

Millie looked around the table anxiously.

“Does that mean there’ll be a twister?”

“Horsefeathers, my little wormwort. If there ever was, no need for turmoil. We could always dig up those graves, untie the horses, all of us each lie in his own trench for safety from the elements.”

Millie looked imploringly. “You promise?”

The writer’s mother turned to him again. “Ringgold, don’t you want to sit with your kinfolk?”

Ringgold sat at the desk in his room with his head tilted upwards and his arm placed atop his eyes, holding his spectacles off his face. He could hear the doomsday wind outside, never more appropriate, beginning to surge like an ocean current. The paper lay unchanged. He thought of the obituary reading that was the dinner conversation. In his febrile mind, he imagined the view one would have while being lowered into the earth, observing from an increasingly distant point his relatives who stood looking down into the rectangular opening of the tomb, the stone that lay by the table now looming over him. Mother Unthank would no longer risk bandit stick-ups, Millie would have more fabric at her disposal for the hapless dolls, Grandpa Unthank would bury another one and live to tell the tale, Uncle Unthank’s carving would be put to good use, Yen and Vitriol would miss him but understand on some ancient level why he had to go. Ida

would be there, too. The rectangle of light which held his family grew smaller and smaller, until it slowly shrank to the size of a pinpoint and he was committed to his everlasting burial.

What pulled him back from this hypnogogic fancy was a sound he did not recall hearing in the house before. The noise was of glass being burnished. He put on his spectacles and stood up. The sound emanated not from the darkness outside the window, but the darkness outside the room. Ringgold crept toward the door that separated him from the hall, as the warbling grew louder. He opened the door and peeked out. As ever, the hallway held the familial portraits, the heads of deer, the faded ornately patterned carpet which stretched across like an evening sun mirrored in water. But this time, Ida was there, too.

The darkness of the hall was pierced by the candle she held in one hand. In the other was a rag with which she was cleaning a portrait of dust, the glass trilling underneath the fabric. After a moment, she stopped rotating the rag and held the candle slightly closer to inspect the frame. Evidently satisfied with the results, or as near to satisfied as could be expected, she stood back and lingered stock still in the middle of the corridor. The rag was slack in her left hand and the candle burned in the right, reflected both in the ink-black eye of an ever-vigilant stag and the newly-burnished portrait, a distant grandmother gazing downward who had studied ballooning behavior in select species of spiders, the flickering flame rising out of her collar. Ringgold and Ida passed a moment in silence, with no noise but the wind outside and what went with it. Finally, Ida spoke.

“I can remember, when my mother died, my father labored to bury her how she always insisted upon being buried. He kept a snake in the attic he christened Charlie and was always bedeviled by the night hags come bed-time. He had her lowered in a coffin with a cord running through it so she might ring a ball in the event she was entombed whilst still among the quick. When evening fell, he heard the bell ringing. The wind had picked up but it made no nevermind to him. He dug her up and unbolted the box, but she was unappreciative. For two hours he sat her at the dinner table and not until those two hours had elapsed did he feel convinced she really had shuffled off after all. Back underground she went.

“The following night, the wind was howling and through it he heard the dinning of the bell once more. He tossed and turned, but could not take the chance. He ran out to exhume the missus all over again. This time, he propped the sarcophagus up and gave her full view of himself while he chopped kindling wood. This failed to rouse her and she was soon back lower than dirt, and this time, to stay. Nary a night and day passed where there wasn’t a knell from that bell. My father never espied my mother again, so far as I know, but so long as the wind blew, the bell was sure to keep tolling. All my father wanted encasing him was plain soil, yet

sometimes I swore, at times, I could hear a ringing by his grave, too. That was when he died. It runs in the family."

At this, she glanced back at the portrait, which was hanging slightly askew. She extended one finger to readjust it. Then, she blew out the candle and retreated into the enveloping darkness.

Ringgold stared into the recesses of the unilluminated corridor for a moment longer, before ducking back within the candlelight of his atavistic room. No sound filled his ears but the whispering of the wind. The house had taken on a sepulchral coldness, chilled further by the night. On account of his fatal disease and imminent death, he considered drafting another will. He recalled having been inclined to write the first one when he was younger, in order to see what all the fuss was about. Now he decided, however, that he had precious little to bequeath, all except perhaps for the essay paper, unchanged since his arrival. So it was to pass that he shall never set a pen - dip, fountain, quill, or otherwise - to the white sheet again. He began walking to embrace the shroud of his deathbed. Perhaps it was better after all that the swan song symphony should go unfinished.

As he lay prostrated in bed, a dying man's thoughts raced through his mind and he bid one final farewell, not without its share of emotions some may label bitterness and bewilderment, to the strange world it had been his lot to inhabit for a lifespan that felt alternately short and long. He drifted off and a dream - or, perhaps, a vision? - flitted behind his eyes. Seven members of the family skipped or galloped respectively through a rolling field of wormwort, as Ringgold lay asleep on a bed of the vegetation. Each relation wore a bell that was clanging gently with the motion of the bearer and the wind, while Ringgold's own was dormant upon the ground, wormwort swaying in the sighing of the breeze.

The writer - and all the other things he may be besides - sank fully into blank unconsciousness, and let the eternal slumber claim him for itself at long last.

Ringgold awoke to the sight of his mother latching the rusty bolt on the window. Through the glass fell the orange light of evening. He made no noise, and she only noticed he was awake when she turned and saw him sitting up with wide, vacant eyes.

"There's my little hay fever patient! All that pollen, no wonder you've been the way you've been as of late! It explains why your nasal dorsum's been acting up, too. You were really starting to perturb your poor arthritic mother. Of course, you always were prone to it, even as a babe. I was going to let you rest, and then I noticed a breeze coming in from under your door. You ought to keep that window closed, Ringgold. You never know who might crawl in."

He sneezed a few times, and she answered accordingly. But he kept sneezing, and the sentiment changed. Now it seemed he was more akin to a drowning man who had dodged the life preservers thrown his way and was now left to drift fruitlessly in the sea, through nobody's fault but his own. Mother Picayune moved toward the door, stepping halfway out of the square of dying light.

"Now you just stay right there and recuperate. Your nature almanac can wait until good health finds you again. My, it's draughty in here. There's all sorts of things going around these days. You'll want to convalesce as soon as possible, otherwise you'll never have any fun at home!"

She exited and Ringgold was left staring at an ever familiar wall, directly above the desk. His eyes had not moved deliberately since their lids had opened and his mouth was held slightly agape. A moment later, his mother returned with a chipped candlestick in her hand. She crossed over to the candle and seized it from the sconce. With a gob or two of wax falling from its perch, she placed the candle in the candlestick and the candlestick on top of the desk.

"I declare, it must get awful dark over here. I don't know how you get any writing done!"

As she arranged the candle, she almost knocked over the inkwell and accidentally scattered the pages slightly.

"Dearie me, your poor arthritic mother's gone and put the papers upside-down."

Once the desk was organized, she was all but ready to depart again, clutching at the doorknob, when her head turned to Ringgold with a look of quizzical pity.

"Do what?"

Ringgold remained static and silent.

"Oh, my silly old ears. It must be that darned wind at it again."

And with that, she was gone.

For some time, Ringgold did not move. He continued to gaze at the candle-lighted wall as the window's orange square turned to nothingness. Through the door, he could hear chatter from the dining room.

"…lame leg… only leg… arthritic me… gold bullion in his heart… potash on his head… Grandpa!"

Eventually, all noise inside save for the occasional settling of the house dissipated. It was necessitated that he should blink every once in a while and tighten his lower jaw. Then an idea visited him, an idea that not even idleness could diminish. He turned it over in his mind like a marble and soon knew what he must do. By the time the little hay fever patient rose from the bed, there was no light outside at all.

Ringgold paced about the room, sniffling now and then. He eyed the bedclothes which he could tear and the rafter directly above them, figuring that he couldn't be much heavier than the dead frisson timepiece. Yes, those would do. He sat down at the desk and for a brief time only looked at the paper which held the listless critical essay. He imagined it lying on the ground, kicking its legs up in the air like a cowpoke fatally shot. Then he folded it up and deposited it in the portmanteau, producing a blank page from the depths of the bag. After a slight hesitation, he put pen to paper and began to write.

"Dear Family, by the time you are reading this, I shall be dead."

Ringgold meditated on this, picturing the event in his head, and found this opening decidedly redundant, so he crossed it out and started anew.

"Dear Family, this shall be the last time you ever hear from me, barring any floating quilts. I can no longer bear the burden that it has been my lot to bear from the beginning, since the fright of the camel cricket."

He stood up, paced about, then sat down to write more. If there never was a sure thing, truly this was as close to sure as anything could hope to be. He paid a glance to his loyal coat still on the hanger, a position he was soon to assume.

"No, I implore you—"

He crossed this out.

"No, I beseech you, do not weep for me. My forthcoming self-destruction is the result of neither ailment nor insanity, no matter how much either runs in the family. I simply can no longer shirk from the fact that no better fate is in store for me other than the one I can mete out via the very instrument I have spent my life writing with - by my own hand. Perhaps, through the yarns spun detailing my name and ghastly demise at dinner tables everywhere, you'll hear more of me in death than you ever did in life. So good-by, so long. And I would be remiss not mention in passing reference this domicile, which in its sharp cliffs of familiarity has dared to rival in treacherousness the uncharted hinterlands of the Mind. This house is a morgue, and I—"

His pen froze. The hand with which he would die by stopped dead in its tracks. He looked at this last line and felt a slight gnawing pang. Was “morgue” appropriate in moribund severity? Was not the foregone “charnel house” of yore, with its ancientness and irregularity, the more apt term for the occasion? He crossed out the word in question, and replaced it with the other two. The gnawing did not diminish. “Charnel house” was axed and “morgue” revived and back again, but this supplied nothing but more ink blots on the page. At one point, he inadvertently wrote a nonsensical jumble of all three words together, including letters that did not appear in any of them. He read back once or twice what he had written, and could not in good conscience return the pen to paper. Staring at the wall in front of him yielded precious little in the way of epiphanies, thus he reclined backward in the chair to ogle at the roof. Afflatus in its gilded carriage had yet to materialize at the station.

Ringgold stood up from the chair and paced up and down, left and right, until he had thoroughly exhausted the cardinal directions open to him and graduated to northwest and southeast, southwest and northeast. The candle in its new domain may have illuminated the desk but it did little to clear the gloom surrounding the schooner of his mind and, if anything, only left him feeling more unmoored. Taking it from the stick, he replaced it in the wonted sconce with only a gob or two of wax landing below. At one point, he stood very still in the center of the room and stared at the floor, before deciding he was unlikely to lose much by altering this position to lying on the bed with the blankets, his thwarted noose, underneath him as he stared at the ceiling. Ringgold lay diagonally, bleary eyes pointing upwards through his spectacles.

And somewhere, out in the dark, the rising wind began to stir up doomsday yet again.

THE END